DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 280 312 FL 016 577

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TITLE "Thank You for Working With Me": Experiment in Cooperative Learning.
PUB DATE 86
NOTE 7p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Journal Articles (080)
JOURNAL CIT Passage; v2 n3 p26-29 Win 1986

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Accountability; Cooperation; Cooperative Planning; Educational Strategies; English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Group Dynamics; *Interpersonal Competence; Learning Processes; *Limited English Speaking; *Refugees; Skill Development; Social Behavior; *Social Integration; Student Needs; *Teamwork
IDENTIFIERS *Cooperative Learning; Philippine Refugee Processing Center

ABSTRACT

Cooperative Learning is a teaching methodology based on the belief that learning increases as students develop cooperative skills. A recent experiment with cooperative learning at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center indicates that it can be used effectively with low-level learners of English as a second language to foster both language learning and positive social skills. The approach focuses on development of three characteristics: positive interdependence, individual accountability, and social skills related to small-group interaction. These characteristics of cooperative learning are incorporated into familiar language-learning activities. Teachers make a commitment to the belief that each student can learn by interacting with peers. The benefits of the approach are substantial and include increased student participation and confidence, positive social behavior, and acceptance of responsibility. (MSE)

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"Thank You for Working with Me": Experiment in Cooperative Learning.

Sally Ringdahl and Others

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passage

a journal of refugee education

Passage is a joint project of the agencies implementing the Overseas Refugee Training Program.

Volume 2, Number 3
Winter 1986

Implementing Agencies

A Consortium: Experiment in International Living, Save the Children Federation
Galang, Indonesia

The International Catholic Migration Commission
Bataan, Philippines

The Consortium: Experiment in International Living, Save the Children Federation, World Education
Phanat Nikhom, Thailand

The Refugee Service Center, Center for Applied Linguistics
Manila, Philippines
Washington, D.C.

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Passage has been developed and printed under a cooperative agreement with the Bureau for Refugee Programs of the U.S. Department of State. The material appearing herein does not necessarily represent the policy of that agency, nor the endorsement of the Federal Government.

Passage is published three times a year and distributed by the Center for Applied Linguistics with offices located at 1118 22nd Street, NW, Washington, D.C. 20037 and The Victoria Bldg., 8th floor, 429 United Nations Ave., Ermita, Metro Manila, Philippines.

Passage is available to subscribers at $9.00 a year. For information, write to the Center for Applied Linguistics.

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Passage is funded by the Bureau for Refugee Programs of the U.S. Department of State.

CONTENTS

FEATURES

The D-E Work Orientation Pilot Program in Phanat Nikhom *by Gregory Williams* 6

Letters from Eastern European Refugees *by Kathryn Solon, with Peter Havlicek, Ana-Maria Tana, and Gregor Zalewski* 10

Yes, They Can *by Deborah L. Schaffer* 15

Clinic Simulation *by Jonathan Wheeler* 18

Child Care Center *by Somthavil "Boom" Klinmahorm* 21

"Thank You for Working with Me": Experiment in Cooperative Learning *by Sally Ringdahl, Hiroe Kobayashi, Silverus Chan, Mena Facunla, Evelyn Ibasco, Milagros Javier, and Elizabeth Moreno* 26

Wordplay: A Poetry Workshop by Jean McConochie at Bataan *by Douglas Gilzow* 30

A Refugee Family, *a photo essay by Julius Peter Obligación* 32

A Week in Woonsocket *by Sinith ("Aood") Sitthiraksa* 36

The Cultural Assimilation of Indochinese Refugees *by Kathleen Corey* 41

What Should I Do Next? Learning to Seek Clarification on the Job *by J. B. Unggul Djatmika* 44

Easing the Transition: Teaching Migrants in the Orderly Departure Program *by Marian Webster and Susan Belmont* 46

The Listening Puzzle: A Multi-Purpose Listening Exercise for Advanced ESL Classes *by Erlinda Benavidez* 52

Dramatization as a Teaching Technique in Work Orientation *by Susan Jane Barcinas and Maria Dolores Gozar* 54

Attitudes, Values, and Life Skills: An Approach to Cultural Orientation *by David Ancel* 58

An Introduction to the Cham: Muslim Refugees from Vietnam *by Carl L. Bankston III* 60

DEPARTMENTS

Letters 4

Update 4

'Thank You for Working with Me': Experiment in Cooperative Learning

Sally Ringdahl, Hiroe Kobayashi, Silverus Chan, Mena Facunla, Evelyn Ibasco, Milagros Javier, and Elizabeth Moreno
Philippine Refugee Processing Center

Cooperative Learning is a teaching methodology based on the belief that learning increases as students develop cooperative skills. A recent experiment with Cooperative Learning at the Philippine Refugee Processing Center indicates that it can be used effectively with low-level ESL learners to foster language learning as well as positive social skills. This article describes the principles behind Cooperative Leaning and how these principles have been put to practice at the PRPC.

Recent surveys on the social skills of refugees in the U.S. indicate that they rarely socialize or ask for clarification of instructions and directions on the job (Literacy 85 1983). Conclusions drawn from these observations made at job sites may also be valid for the more general social situations of Indochinese refugees in the U.S., who often isolate themselves, avoiding contact with their sponsors or neighbors. To better prepare refugee students, classroom practice should include greater emphasis on positive social skills.

A recent experiment with Cooperative Learning by a group of eight teachers at the PRPC was aimed at integrating language and social skills. Cooperative Learning, developed by Johnson and Johnson (1975, 1981, 1982, 1985), is a teaching methodology based on the belief that learning increases as students develop cooperative skills. It makes use of small-group work, giving special emphasis to the fostering of cooperation among group members. It goes beyond typical small-group techniques by providing specific strategies that require cooperation.

Johnson and Johnson believe there are three basic characteristics of Cooperative Learning that will result in students' increased learning, self-confidence, and positive social skills. These are: positive interdependence, individual accountability, and social skills related to small-group interaction. ESL teachers can easily adapt familiar activities to incorporate these characteristics of Cooperative Learning into their lessons.

Positive Interdependence

For positive interdependence to occur, students must recognize the benefits of participating in the group activity. An easy way to achieve this is to have members share tasks, assigning roles which require the group to cooperate in producing a single product. Each task requires input from all members and compels individuals to seek help from others.

Working together on a reading task is one way to foster positive interdependence. One student, the "reader," who has the only copy of the text, reads the story aloud twice, then reads the questions provided. Another member, the "recorder," writes down three answers agreed upon by the group. Later the "reporter" presents to the class the answer the group judges to be the best. Each student makes a specific contribution essential for the completion of the task. Their reliance on each other contributes to their understanding of the lesson.

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Individual Accountability

Cooperative Learning requires that teachers continually monitor students' progress to ensure their involvement and achievement.

Structuring positive interdependence into activities promotes involvement of all students. However, to verify the degree of individual comprehension the teacher may monitor progress by occasionally asking individuals to verify group answers. When a student is unable to answer, the teacher may redirect the question to other group members, rather than provide the answer. This encourages group members to assist slower peers. In a multi-level class, the teacher can monitor the progress of all students by selecting questions at varying levels of difficulty. In addition, individual tests may be administered to measure progress.

Use and Development of Social Skills

All individuals are members of groups, such as families, dormitories, or teaching teams. The successful functioning of these groups requires that individuals develop and use social skills. The skill may be basic, such as thanking group members, or complex, such as expressing disagreement and persuading others to change their opinions.

Cooperative Learning provides an excellent context for social language. ESL teachers can design classroom activities to allow practice of socially appropriate language for greeting, thanking, clarifying, or encouraging.

Suppose, for example, that along with learning a certain academic topic, the teacher wants the students to apply the social skill of encouraging reticent group members to participate. The teacher first introduces the topic, then reviews phrases students can use to help each other take part in an activity. Thereafter, group activities provide the opportunity both to practice the social skill and to carry out a specific academic task.

Students need to evaluate the degree to which they encouraged the participation of all group members. To facilitate this evaluation, either the teacher or designated students may act as observers who take notes on students' use of this social skill during group activities. Time must be scheduled within academic lesson for discussing how well the accompanying social skill was applied.

Initially, the practice of these skills may seem contrived or artificial, but gradually they will become routine.

Sample Lesson

This lesson, incorporating Cooperative Learning strategies, is based on Unit 4 in *The New Arrival*, Book Two. To set the context for the lesson, the teacher displays an enlarged version of the picture of a supermarket from page 14, and encourages discussion about it. The teacher then reads the story to the students.

Social skill: The social skill to be emphasized is maximizing group participation by having students request information and thank individuals. Strategies for requesting information are introduced to the class. Students are taught the way an American would look directly at someone and say his or her name with rising intonation, making the request indirectly. They also learn common expressions, such as, "What do you think?" or " Do you agree?" and "Is this right?" Phrases for thanking individuals are taught, e.g., "Thank you" and "That's a good idea."

Grouping: From the twelve students in the class, the teacher selects, as leaders, the four most proficient. Other students join the group of their choice to form groups of three. Each group appoints its own writer and reporter.

Academic task: Students read the story from page 15 of *The New Arrival*. Each group receives one copy of the story, and the leader directs the reading. Students underline unfamiliar words while they are reading the story, and the writer copies the new words on a large piece of manila paper. Students refer to bilingual dictionaries and phrasebooks for translation of the words. During the discussions, the teacher monitors the group leaders to see that they are carrying out their roles of encouraging participation and thanking others. (Frequently, the leader succumbs to the temptation to perform all roles.) If asked for assistance in defining words, the teacher redirects the questions to group members. When the bilingual list is completed, students indicate that they have helped to compile the lists by signing their names. The leader is responsible for ensuring that each individual signs the list. The reporters from the four groups come to the front of the class and post the word list from their group. Each reporter reads the words in English and offers translations of the words.

Individual accountability: The teacher administers an oral test to determine the individual's success in performing assigned roles. At the end of the lesson, the teacher reviews the phrases used when thanking people and requires students to thank each other. One teacher reported,"After group work, I told my students to say 'thank you' to their partners. They

giggled, feeling awkward toward each other. I felt embarrassed. But they did it."

Using Cooperative Learning at the PRPC

ESL teachers in our program meet with one supervisor and one trainer for biweekly training sessions for a period of three months. For our group, each of the six training sessions featured one element of Cooperative Learning: 1) Introduction to Cooperative Learning, 2) positive interdependence, 3) individual accountability, 4) the task and cooperative goal structure, 5) processing group cooperative skills, and 6) review. The targeted social skill was defined, and a lesson was presented which incorporated the designated aspect of Cooperative Learning. This was followed by a discussion of the application of the techniques to ESL B-level classes.

The ESL supervisor maintained close contact with each of the teachers using Cooperative Learning. Teachers were observed on a regular basis, and supervisors discussed their strengths and offered suggestions for further improvement. Students' behavior and the teacher's role were discussed in one-to-one conferences. In weekly team meetings, the supervisor and teachers made lesson plans applying Cooperative Learning strategies to the teaching of competencies or the development of reading and writing skills.

Teachers' initial reactions to Cooperative Learning indicated anxieties and doubts which were reflected in their questions: "How can cooperative learning possibly work with a class whose scores on placement tests ranged from zero to four – or with students who respond to 'How old are you?' by simply repeating the question?" "How will I know if what I am doing is Cooperative Learning?"

At first, students were also confused. After one lesson, an instructor reported, "I moved around to see how each group was doing. One group did not know what to do with the task; another group was doing it completely wrong; and members in the other group refused to work together."

As teachers' facility with Cooperative Learning increased, they were able to see positive changes in student behavior, classroom climate, and English language proficiency, as these two reports illustrate.

> "The increased confidence of my students became evident. One student began the cycle with very little self-confidence and kept telling me how bad his English was. I gave him the role of leader and reporter. As he gained confidence in speaking English, his potential as a leader surfaced. I also saw shy students come out of their shells."
>
> "A kind of support network is established so that each one feels responsible for the success and failure of every group member. To cite an example, Ta, the slowest student in the group successfully uttered a correct structure. Automatically, the whole group clapped their hands and Ta blushed with a sense of pride. Ly, the leader of the group, felt a certain amount of responsibility and was willing to tutor Ta on Sundays."

Changes in Teachers' Role

Cooperative Learning requires teachers to develop a new role as facilitators who monitor student activities. Some teachers find it difficult to assume this new role, because it is so different from conventional teaching, in which teachers are usually the central figures. Initially, this transition may make teachers anxious and cause some resistance to Cooperative Learning. Gradually, the teachers become comfortable with their new role. "My role as a teacher changed," one teacher observed. "I never felt I was giving my 'master' image, but I was no longer lecturing, no longer the boss. I was a facilitator who directs, observes, monitors, and encourages – much like the conductor of a symphony."

Changes in Students' Role

Refugee students who are accustomed to a passive role in classrooms find it difficult at first when an active role is demanded of them. As teachers adjust to their new role, students also begin to accommodate. "Students tended to be more sensitive to the needs of their classmates," one teacher noted. "The strong students enhanced the spirit of sharing by extending their thoughts or knowledge to slower students. The slower students didn't feel that they were left behind, for they were always made to feel that they were an important part of the group."

Cooperative Learning maximizes student participation in the learning process. In carrying out group tasks, students inquire, clarify, negotiate, disagree, and summarize. They participate at their level of language proficiency; the slower students take an opportunity to contribute, while faster ones are willing to share their ideas. One teacher commented that her students demonstrated a level of knowledge and language that exceeded her expectations."The on-task behavior of students was amazing," she said. Another teacher observed that her students

preferred to continue working, rather than take their scheduled breaks.

In Cooperative Learning, student participation results in greater internalizing of the material being taught. Students who had participated in Cooperative Learning expressed their preference for the model. To quote some: "We read, understand, speak, and write." "We can ask our classmates and the teacher." "I understand more, because I do it." "I can use and say something I knew before." "I learn from my classmates, and I can help another student."

Conclusion

Cooperative Learning requires teachers to make a commitment to the belief that each student can learn by interacting with peers. Cooperative Learning does not happen overnight. It takes a lot of patience and determination. Teachers need to master the skills of developing activities, grouping, monitoring, and processing. Johnson and Johnson (1975) say that it may take two years to perfect such skills.

But once Cooperative Learning takes place, pedagogical benefits for teachers and students are enormous. Student participation and confidence increase, and positive social behavior develops. Teachers see students working together, taking responsibility for their own learning and that of their peers. The teachers fit into the new role of facilitator, disappearing from the center stage; the students come forward, taking more active roles. Yet, both share laughter and applause at the end of class. This fulfillment has motivated the teachers in this experimental group to continue using Cooperative Learning.

"I like what Cooperative Learning did to my students and me," one teacher said. "I'd like to experience again the fulfillment of being a teacher, without being a TEACHER."

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